Yale-UN Oral History

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Index: Central America

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James Sutterlin: This is a Yale Program interview with former President Alfredo Cristiani in San Salvador, El Salvador, on July 25th, 1997, the interviewer is Sutterlin.

Dr. Cristiani, in beginning this interview I will just mention that, as far as I understand it, the United Nations role in El Salvador, in particular, was concentrated in four different areas. (1) in mediation, (2) in verification including peacekeeping, (3) in democratization, and finally (4) in economic development. The questions that I will be posing, the focus of our discussion, I think, will be on those four subjects. I wanted to mention, at the beginning, back in 1994 you had a very extensive interview with Tommy Sue Montgomery. I don't know if you remember that or not, a woman.

Alfredo Cristiani: In '94?

JS: In '94. Very extensive. An excellent interview. So, in some cases, we may be repeating things that you dealt with at that point. I will try not to. I have the interview and it's very interesting. The other thing I wanted to mention at the beginning, is that Pérez de Cuéllar has just completed his memoirs. They will be published next month. I helped to write them. Going through some of these questions, I may quote to you occasionally from what Pérez de Cuéllar had to say on the same subject, to stimulate your – perhaps, your differences. I would like to say that Mr. Pérez de Cuéllar speaks very

highly of your role. In fact he says that the peace process could not have succeeded in El Salvador without Cristiani. So, with that in the background let me begin by posing a kind of historical question. That is, as you think of the peace process, the negotiating process that you were so deeply involved in, do you see that historically as a continuation of the earlier contacts that were initiated when Mr. Duarte was president with the FMLN or do you see it as stemming primarily from the Contadora initiative and the Arias plan? How do you see the genesis, so to speak, of the negotiations here?

AC: I think everything has a little bearing, at least, in the negotiating process. However, my feeling is that the FMLN never had a sincere intention of negotiating politically until after the 1989 offensive. Prior to that it was simply playing politics. President Duarte never offered a process in itself. He simply called for direct contacts in a more or less – it really wasn't even a planned process – it was just whenever he thought that he could meet with them to try to talk for a one day period that he would do so. This is not trying to curtail his willingness to reach a political agreement. It was simply a way that he went about trying to get the FMLN involved in political negotiations. When offered the negotiating process as a way out, we had, prior to that, while we were president-elect, had discussed, I would say in quite detail with Father Ellacuría the idea about this process we would offer. Just for the sake of trying to be able to grasp a – I would say a sense of where the FMLN would be in their answer to such an offer – Father Ellacuría made one or two trips to Nicaragua and met with the Commandante, the five leaders of the different groups involved in the FMLN. He came back both times very frustrated with the result of those meetings, saying that he did not see a real willingness of

the FMLN. Obviously, politically they couldn't back out of it. But they were still betting on popular insurrection, at that time. This must have been between March and June of 1989. Nevertheless, we offered the peace process and as everybody thought, the FMLN said yes. There were two meetings. One in September in Mexico, which was the first, and the second in October in Costa Rica. Two weeks later they were launching the biggest offensive of the twelve-year war and it was very obvious that they really had no intention of reaching any agreement. What they were looking for was a military takeover of power. So, I think that even though there maybe was a link in our negotiations and the Arias Plan, it wasn't until after that offensive that the FMLN, I think, really gave it a thought about being serious in looking for political agreement. I would think Contadora had a lot of bearing, but I think that Contadora was the starting point of Esquipulas, in a sense. Making Esquipulas a more autonomous effort when speaking about the Central American region. Contadora had countries outside of the region of involved. I think that Esquipulas II created a political pressure for democratization, for the end of armed conflict. As you probably know, the FMLN wanted to stay away from Esquipulas II as much as possible, saying that it was not a sincere and worthy effort. They always try to discredit the Esquipulas II effort. But I think that it did generate, regionally speaking, enough pressure for the negotiations to be successful. Especially after the offensive, Ortega could no longer deny his involvement with the Salvadorian war and him backing out of it within the Esquipulas II framework put more pressure on the FMLN.

JS: Yes. That was my next question. What was the extent of influence you feel that external actors had, that is, in particular, the events in Nicaragua but also the almost

simultaneous events in Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall coming down? Do you feel that these had an effect in terms of the negotiations? And if so, how much?

AC: Obviously, they did have – when the Communist ideology crumbled – they were left without an offer, because that is exactly what they were offering, the Salvadorians. So without being able to say "We are fighting for you because we want to give you this way of living in El Salvador," they had no way to get support from the Salvadorian people because everybody was aware that it had failed all over the world and that communism was crumbling down. So that does have an effect in making them look for a political solution. The events in Nicaragua – yes and no. I still believe that even if the war would have continued into Mrs. Chamorro's term, which fortunately it didn't, because she came into power when the FMLN was already willing to negotiate, but at the beginning, I think that she had no real control over the Sandinista army and it was through the Sandinista army that they were sending the weapons and receiving logistical support. So I don't think that that had much bearing but if we look at it from the perspective: "Well, if we are trying to emulate the Sandinista revolution in El Salvador, then how come the people of Nicaragua have just voted for the first time and voted against that Sandinista revolution? What are we really offering the Salvadorians?" So in some respects it did have a bearing, but I think that the strongest influence had to do with their realizing that they didn't have the support of the Salvadorian people, at least up to a popular insurrection level. Secondly, militarily they didn't have enough strength to take over the government. Now, in realizing this latter fact, with the Sandinistas and the Russians out of the picture, it obviously reinforced their acceptance of the fact that

militarily it was a lost cause. Unless they wanted to remain, as in Guatemala after the worst part of their war, and sort of linger into smaller groups and just stay as a sometimes active guerilla force. I don't think that this is what they really wanted.

JS: The other external actor that you didn't mention is Cuba. How important was Cuba?

AC: Cuba is the model. Obviously Russia couldn't be because we are more like Cubans than Russians. So Cuba had an effect. Castro is, within the Communist and Socialist groups of Latin America, a sort of "big boss." It was Castro who brought them together saying, "We are not going to support five isolated efforts, you have to come together and fight as one group." So he had a lot of bearing which was not very helpful. I believe that Castro was never really behind the negotiation efforts.

JS: Which leads me to the next question because Pérez de Cuéllar always felt that it was desirable to bring Cuba, the United States and the Soviet Union directly into the negotiating picture. And in fact, he proposed that. And I believe the FMLN also considers that important. Then wanted to get Cuba involved. I don't know what your position was on that. Whether you were also pushing the Secretary-General to get directly involved or . . .

AC: I didn't really feel that it would be necessary for the process to move forward. I obviously felt very strongly that agreements between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. - the

Soviet Union - would have a strong bearing as it did. But I think that, in a way, Castro, although he is not proving to be more independent than everyone thought before the fall of the Soviet Union, I still believe that he would not go against the Soviet Union, at least outwardly. So I didn't really feel that it was necessary. Besides, his involvement would have probably complicated things, because he would have tried to interfere with the negotiating process directly. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. said "We support the process and will do everything for this process to continue, but we don't want to get involved in what to negotiate and what not." Castro is the type of person that would have probably sent people trying to get into the negotiation, which I believe was not the role that was needed. I think that the Five Friends, or Four Friends Plus One, as they called them, had a stronger impact because of their indirect involvement in it, just support of the process doing what was needed for the process to continue as swiftly as possible. So I didn't really feel that Fidel would have been that much help.

JS: The Secretary-General and de Soto also felt that it would be desirable for the United States to have direct contact with the FMLN and Pérez de Cuéllar proposed that to Baker and actually to Bush. They said, "No, not until Cristiani agrees." As far as I know, you never agreed. But what was your thinking on that?

AC: It really wasn't that I never agreed. It's what the contact should have as an objective was what we talked about. If it would have been a direct contact in such a way where it would be a bypass over the Salvadorian government, as to what the negotiations would deal with, we did not agree. Unfortunately, the FMLN would have taken that as a

sort of open door to do it or to try to do it. I think that the U.S., not as a government and not as a country, maybe would have gone into it – but people get involved and think that they can help and I think that they would have finally engaged in that. What I thought, and what I agreed to, was that there should be gestures; that the United States should give the FMLN confidence that even though the U.S. had been a supporter of a government and therefore an enemy of the FMLN, that if the negotiating process would come to an end, that the United States would be a guarantor of the agreement. That the United States would not be against such an agreement. So, to have a contact that would build up confidence. The first such contact which was visible was when we OK'd Ambassador Walker's trip to a settlement, a guerilla settlement, in the Northeast part of the country. So it wasn't that we disagreed totally, it was how these contacts – where should they move – that we were careful about. I think that the U.S. did exactly that. Tried to have contacts that would build confidence in the FMLN.

JS: I think that one of the reasons that Pérez de Cuéllar wanted the U.S. to have direct contact was because of the rather intense criticism that the United States made of de Soto, Alvaro de Soto as not being impartial – of being partial towards the FMLN. The Secretary-General had the impression that was also your view.

AC: He had the right impression.

JS: His idea was that if the Americans could talk directly, they would see what de Soto was doing was simply representing, in the course of the negotiations, what the FMLN was saying, not necessarily supporting them. What was your view on this?

AC: I wouldn't say that de Soto would misrepresent the government's view or the FMLN's view in his pendular negotiation. But, in our view, he always sought for the government to give in more so than the FMLN. This was because of the way he would normally come up and wanted always us to, you know, a little bit more here, a little bit more there. Now, maybe this was not so obvious within the negotiating process itself. It became more obvious to me in the phase of complying with the agreements. As you probably know, between '92 and '94 -- we had three different representatives of the UN in El Salvador. That's less than a year per representative that is normally longer – at least they go into a one-year contract. Invariably, the reason why these people did not want to continue their role is that their reports were always misrepresented by de Soto. So during that stage, it was obvious that he would always favor the FMLN, saying that things were wrong with the government and the FMLN was complying. With respect to the weapons of the FMLN, he was always saying that "No, he had the word of the FMLN, he counted on the FMLN's word with respect to the amount of weapons that they had turned in."

JS: I want to ask you about your relations with Washington in this connection. And if I may, I will read you just a brief excerpt from Pérez de Cuéllar where he says that "A fairly complicating factor was the continuing distrust of the UN officers' team by President Cristiani and the more rightist element in his party and by influential officials in

the U.S. government. At the beginning of October, Bernard Aronson and Tom Pickering had a three-hour meeting with de Soto, during which Aronson laid out in detail U.S. complaints about the way the United Nations was handling the negotiations. Mr. Aronson said that as the Secretary-General had suggested, the U.S. government had given signals to the Cubans that it was willing to cooperate with them for the purpose of the peace. It had now given visas to the FMLN, but it was frustrated that the Secretary-General was not playing the role of mediator for which he had been empowered by the Geneva Agreement. The Secretary-General or de Soto should put forward proposals and force the parties to accept or reject them. Mr. Aronson summarized the U.S. position in five points. The Secretary-General should play a more visible role stressing the urgency of the situation, a strict calendar for non-stop negotiations should be put into effect, as de Soto had suggested. With the participation on the FMLN side of what Joaquín Villalobos a multi-party negotiation commission, again as de Soto had suggested, should be established if the end-game scenario was in place and enhancement of de Soto's role as a mediator capable of threatening the parties that they would pay a price for not accepting his efforts, and five, supporting the Security Council." That was the U.S. position as he expressed it to de Soto. The same day, Pérez de Cuéllar met with Secretary Baker and President Bush and discussed this same subject. Pérez de Cuéllar noted that, "I had discussed the problem recently with President Cristiani who I felt was a good and honest man. He was making every possible effort, despite his difficulty with the army and the right wing. I had suggested to him the idea of including some of the opposition parties in the government delegation in order to lend credibility to the government's position." The question is, in all of this, to what extent were you working with the U.S. Administration,

with the State Department and White House in these positions that Aronson . . . Also, what was your attitude towards the multi-party delegation?

AC: No. I would never have accepted the idea that the UN should make suggestions – and it was an either/or thing – unless it would have been in the mechanics of the process, but not on – the issues within the negotiations. We never accepted, in that respect, the true meaning of mediator where the mediator would finally put forth the agreement and both sides would accept. It was more of an intermediation effort.

JS: I wanted to ask you about that.

AC: We thought that the UN should make suggestions as to how to get the two positions as close as possible and acceptable for both parties. Which is different than putting, "Okay, this is my solution" to the idea. With respect to that, I imagine it was in September of '91. I would agree in that sense with respect to the mechanics, it was necessary for the UN to say, "Wait a minute, let's make a halt," which is what happened in New York in September. We cannot go on and on and on bringing new issues to the table. Because once you solve one issue if somebody else brings a new issue then there is a never ending sort of a process. The idea of having the UN saying, "We want you to meet, we want to discuss whatever is left of the agenda and make a clear statement of what the negotiations should entail from now on and nobody can add anything else to it," that was the only reason I accepted to go to the UN for ten days to try to reach such an agreement. Because that would really make the negotiating process much shorter. The

FMLN kept on bringing issues and wanted to discuss new issues every time. When we reached an agreement on one a new thing popped up. I think, unfortunately, in that respect, the UN did not put a stop to that. He kept bringing in and accepting these new issues on the table. I think that if that was the intention of the U.S. to put forward a proposal on how to speed up the negotiations even though I always, in my conversations with Aronson or Baker or with President Bush, I always said that this thing seems to be a never ending process and I always told him that we felt that the FMLN would keep on including new issues.

With respect to a multi-party, I would not have accepted either. I think that the parties played a role, a very important role, with respect to the constitutional reform but going beyond that in other issues it would probably have delayed the process. Because we have so many parties everyone would like to be a hero saying that their proposal was the one that got us to the final stage that it would have been very complicated to deal with. Besides, the political parties turned down that offer. It was the first offer I made in trying to form the negotiating committee. I remember the Christian Democrats coming up to me and saying that they would not participate because it was an idea that was "born dead." So we had offered the political parties and they did not accept. I think it was for the best. Maybe I was wrong in trying to reach such a deal. The FMLN did not like the political parties. As you might know, even the UN – well, Alvaro de Soto – got extremely mad because the inter-party committee – they had a name, Interpartidaria – went up to Mexico in April of '91 and they told the FMLN: "Wait a minute, we have discussed among us, and if it's drafting the constitution or reforming the constitution, you've got to accept our role because we are in the National Assembly and we are the

ones approving these reforms so you might as well take this into consideration." De Soto was mad because the political parties showed up. I think that the most important, the most difficult, of the agreements was reached in April of '91. That was the Constitutional agreement. The rest is what we call "carpinteria," I don't know how to say it in English.

JS: Woodwork.

AC: Woodwork around the real issue.

JS: I wanted to pursue this question of the difference between mediator and intermediary because the way it is written in this book suggests that in fact de Soto, representing the Secretary-General, did in fact present a number of papers that were the basis ultimately of a good part of the agreement, particularly on human rights.

AC: Which was the least ingenious of the agreement.

JS: I just wanted to ask you about this. Because it is not just an issue in El Salvador but elsewhere.

AC: Let me try, I know that there is a fine line between the roles. I think that even though de Soto presented papers, it was not a "take it or leave it" proposal, it was more of a working document. That we agreed on. Because that working document could be trashed completely or, if it had good things, worked on. A lot of the ideas that de Soto

came up with were finally adopted as part of the agreement. It wasn't that it was a useless role, sometimes it became very handy and useful. Where I place the fine line is that when you talk about mediation sometimes what the mediator will do is listen to both sides and then decide on where the agreement should stand. That's a take it or leave it situation. You can agree on that or disagree on that. That would have been a mess. I think that this pendular role that he played even within a working session – at night he would try to draft things differently or try to pick up ideas that he heard at the table and put it – rephrase them in some way or another, but then bringing it as a working document for the next meeting. I call that inter-mediation because there is no take it or leave it situation. I'm not sure whether I define the terms correctly, but that is how I differentiate.

JS: I think it's good to make that clear.

AC: As a matter of fact, when we invited the Secretary-General the word was inter-mediate not mediate.

JS: You know the Cyprus negotiations collapsed on this very issue long ago. I wanted to take now that question a little further. Again, the United States, with the support, eventually, of the Soviet Union, pushed very hard for Pérez de Cuéllar to assume direct leadership of the negotiations and, in fact, replace de Soto. Pérez de Cuéllar refused. Were you urging this also? In other words was your influence being felt in Washington or not?

AC: I didn't think it was necessary all the time. I think there were specific times where he should have appeared personally. I think that in the final round which was December of '91 it was very obvious that his role was helpful in bringing an agreement right before midnight of December 31st. So, if in other instances, that could have been something that could have happened, I think that we would have probably saved some time during the other meetings. I'm not sure that in the long run what happened, you know, having always something to fall back at the UN level was also helpful. I would not have necessarily said that I wanted to push for a . . .

JS: You might be interested in – actually this was discussed at the White House and again Bush was pushing the Secretary-General and the Secretary-General was trying to explain why he wouldn't do it. This is just of possible interest to you. Bush said, "I don't understand, why these people, the FMLN, should have equal standing, the elections in El Salvador were free and fair and Cristiani is doing his best. Why should the FMLN have the same standing at the table?" That was Bush's complaint to Pérez de Cuéllar. Pérez de Cuéllar sought to explain, "Well, we have to be impartial at the UN. We did not make a distinction between the FMLN and the government." I am just wondering though if these thoughts that Bush expressed here, if you had similar thoughts.

AC: Maybe, in a way, we are – this had more to do with de Soto than Pérez de Cuéllar, himself. Let me start by saying this. We were the ones that offered the process to negotiate a way out. We were practically sitting with them on the other side of the table from us. Nevertheless, the UN, or at least a representative of the UN, should be more

favorable in saying "a government cannot even start to talk about this," and not waiting for the government to really say, "Wait a minute, I can't do that. I'll never discuss this with the FMLN, this is not possible." Or even explaining to the FMLN, at least trying to do something with the FMLN, saying, "Listen, you know, the government simply cannot accept this from anybody, you have to understand that." But the problem was that I don't think that de Soto ever understood what we were looking for. Because I don't think he agreed with us, why or how can you justify this war and I think he never really understood why we were willing to sit down with the FMLN. The only reason they had was that when they took up arms, they had no political space. But that's it. Once there is political space for them, I'm not giving them anything else. Why treat them more favorable than any other political party? Not only our own, but the other political parties that were working within the democratic framework. In that respect, I think that we always had a complaint that it wasn't two sides, it was a government, in representation of the rest of the political parties that had been willing to work within the democratic framework in El Salvador, regardless how imperfect or incipient it was, and that they treated the FMLN as a counterpart. It really wasn't. The FMLN had to be seen, and was not by Alvaro de Soto, as simply – in that case a political group that had weapons and what we were trying to do is guaranteeing them that without weapons they now had a space within the political framework of the country in which to work. There is a subtle difference between how the UN should have seen the government and how they should have seen the FMLN. This is a political group and I am trying to bring them into this big framework that I am, right now, at the head of for reasons that the people wanted me to be. It's not that this government is fighting this group. I wasn't behind that. I never had

a fight with anybody. So it wasn't our government that was fighting. We already found the thing there. I think that those things were not understood by de Soto and sometimes were confused on how they should treat the government and how they should treat the FMLN.

JS: Bush expressed it rather directly, in his conversation.

AC: He can afford to. Third world countries don't have the clout to do so.

JS: When you did go to New York in September, did you have a sense that there were one or two basic issues that needed to be overcome, that things had reached a point where there was one or two basic things that needed to be resolved and if resolved would bring success?

AC: Yes. First of all, I think that the clarification of the agenda issues was extremely important. To say that, "From now on nobody brings and says anything else but this." Even going a little bit further and saying "What we mean by this is that we should work in trying to reach this sort of general framework of an agreement." Obviously, within those issues left, there were very sticky issues. I think that one that took a lot of time and really wasn't that sticky was the national police. What was sticky was the transition. I think, after what we experienced in the country, I would say that if I were to change something in the agreements, I would change the transition from the old to the new police. The country was left exposed to the delinquency for a while and we had no

security forces within the country to work with. Obviously, things like the Ad Hoc Committee was another big issue; the cease-fire mechanism, how it would work, but I was always very optimistic that after signing the constitutional agreement, the FMLN had lost any excuse to continue waging. Because you can recall the FMLN saying why they did not accept the democratic process that started in '82 or '84 after the new constitution was written. It was because they believed themselves to be a representative of a large portion of Salvadorians and they did not participate in the drafting of the constitution. That was always their excuse why they could not accept, even though they sometimes have to accept because there were free and fair elections because everybody in the world was in El Salvador watching them and everybody said they looked free and fair. After April of '91 they lost that excuse. They had now participated in the drafting of the new constitutional framework of the country. There were sticky issues but I always felt good after April of '91.

JS: You felt that at that point that the basic question of the reintegration of the FMLN into El Salvadorian society was resolved?

AC: That they now had the framework that they had worked with the rest of the political parties within which to work . . .

JS: I want to move ahead. I know that you don't have too much time. To move from completion of the negotiations with Pérez de Cuéllar to the next stage which was implementation, when there was not just a succession of representatives in El Salvador

but there was a different Secretary-General. I have two questions, there. You dealt with them both. Did you find any difference between...

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JS: . . . Pérez de Cuéllar and Boutros-Ghali in the ways they were dealing with your problems?

AC: There were two totally different stages. Pérez de Cuéllar did the negotiating part and Boutros-Ghali the compliance part, the implementation part. I thought that they both had a very positive attitude toward making a successful story out of El Salvador's process. They were committed to the peace process in the country. I think that what happened was that for Pérez de Cuéllar it was more of an important issue, in a way. He was leaving – he wanted this thing to be successful – he wanted to see it through. Whereas Boutros-Ghali – although he always was very positive toward it – I'm pretty sure it wasn't really as high on his agenda as it was with Pérez de Cuéllar, because he didn't start the process, he got in there in the middle of it. I think that no matter whether there were two different Secretaries-General, the basic representative kept on being the same one.

JS: De Soto?

AC: Yes. He was sort of a link between one and the other.

JS: I was going to ask you that because actually Boutros-Ghali sent Goulding a couple of times rather than de Soto.

AC: Well, at the end, he realized that we would get much further on with Goulding than with de Soto. I think Goulding was a lot more clear-cut.

JS: Even though he was not really familiar with the territory.

AC: Well, I think he was – let me tell you – there was a big issue with respect to the land program. I think Goulding was able to handle an issue that I think de Soto would either have taken a lot longer or complicated things a lot more. I think that Marrack Goulding was – he sort of understood much better what the reality was.

JS: Because he did develop the plans for the land transfer and eventually the Secretary-General presented it to you and which both sides accepted. Has that proved to be a sound plan?

AC: Yes. When you plan an agreement, such an extensive agreement, without starting the implementation of something – once you start implementing things you have to change a few things here and there. But I think it went on without having the agreement

in itself being the problem – it was the implementation and our laws and other things that made it last so long in implementation. So I think it was a good agreement that was reached. Now that I see backwards, now the FMLN wants that land for free. They don't want to pay for it any more. The government hasn't said, "You have to comply with the peace agreement, you have to pay for it, because the agreement was the buying of land and not giving away."

JS: While we are still on the subject of UN personalities. In COPAZ, the representative of the UN was Blanca Antonini. What were the feelings here about the UN participation in COPAZ?

AC: I wasn't involved in COPAZ, but after seeing that everybody in COPAZ liked her, I think she was able to work with a very heterogeneous group of politicians. There is a bill in Congress, I don't know whether it passed or not yet, honoring her for her role in COPAZ.

JS: Oh, really! She is working on UN reform. Maybe she will do as well with that as she did with El Salvador.

AC: You know Blanca was with de Soto during the entire negotiating process. I always thought more in a note taker role – trying to keep up with what Shafik Handal and Oscar Santamaria were saying during the meetings.

JS: Incidentally, going back for just a minute. I have to ask you a kind of indiscreet question. De Soto certainly and Pérez de Cuéllar got the impression, you know, that this is probably an explanation about the de Soto's and perhaps partiality toward the FMLN. The question is you followed the technique of sending a delegation of hard-liners, of people who in fact had very little leeway to make any concessions at all and to hold up until you, yourself, could become involved and take a reasonable position? What do you say to that?

AC: It is totally incorrect. I'm sure that if you talk to Oscar Santamaria, David Escobar Galindo, even General Vargas, you would say that they were more of a moderate group than hard-liners.

JS: I have to say, we did interview Galindo and definitely saw him as serving as the moderate not a hard-liner. So that is what I expected your reaction would be.

AC: Not being personally involved or directly involved with the FMLN was a matter of – in a way – saying: "I'm going to send them a team they could work with," but I never agreed with Duarte meeting people that were outside of the law – and they were outside of the law by every means.

JS: I'd like to go on now to what is this large area really of democratization of which there were various aspects. You had the Truth Commission and the whole human rights operation on the part of ONUSAL and I believe that there was a special person designated

by the United Nations to work with the government as an expert on human rights. ONUSAL also, then, played a rather important role in monitoring the elections in '94 and in making some pretty direct suggestions. In other words, coming fairly close to direct intervention in the domestic affairs of El Salvador. I wanted to get your reaction to all of this. What was the ultimate effect in terms of the prospects of democracy in El Salvador of these actions taken by the United Nations?

AC: Because human rights here had been politicized, somewhat. The left always used it to accuse the government. I was in the opposition with respect to President Duarte but I am pretty sure that he never ordered anybody shot or his rights violated. That is not to say that human rights violations did not go on in the country while he was president. But he didn't condone them or he didn't want them to happen. There wasn't a government policy to break human rights. Neither was ours. But since the issue of human rights had been used for political purposes I think that the role of the UN here was very important to overcome all these huge politicized issues going back so many years – so I think that was very helpful to have – that group here.

JS: Did you think that ONUSAL did that part of its job well?

AC: Yes. We had some very difficult issues to deal with. As you remember, there were three or four FMLN persons that were assassinated very close after the agreements were signed. The first reaction of the FMLN was that the government was annihilating the opposition. I think that ONUSAL being here, saying, "Wait a minute, it could be true,

but you have to investigate further to see if it is true before you start blaming each other." In a way to sort of stop these impulsive reactions every time something happened that everybody was a human rights violator here in the country. That allowed for things like investigations to go on and in some cases, say, "Well, this guy committed a crime for . . ." and in other cases saying, "This had nothing to do with politics. This guy ran into some other guy's car and they got into a quarrel and they shot him. It had nothing to do with politics." I think it was very, very helpful. I think without a team like that here, those issues could have been highly explosive for the starting of the reconciliation process and the strengthening of democracy which was really the end objective of the whole effort. I think that was very helpful.

I'm afraid that I can't be as positive as that with the Truth Committee. I think, in some ways, they went a little too far, beyond what the process called for. For instance, if the objective of the peace process was to have the FMLN participate in the democratic process without weapons, obviously these people wanted to be *diputados* or presidents of the country. For the Truth Committee to have as a punishment, the non-participation in politics for a ten-year period of these people really not understanding what the process was all about. The inevitable came about. The FMLN and the government got together and said, "This is nonsense, what these guys said." We went up to the UN – we didn't go to New York – we told the representative here saying "Listen, this is our agreement. We both now agree not to comply with this recommendation and we are not going to. Since it is our agreement and we can agree to disagree." That is what finally happened. Because although it listed only the top names of one of the groups it was obvious that all the five groups were involved in human rights violations. How are you going to say to

the FMLN leadership "For ten years you are out of politics"? It was simply going the wrong way.

JS: In broader terms, leaving out the UN role, but this question of the Truth Commission, do you feel that it is essential to have this type of investigation and ultimately publication in order to provide a basis for the reintegration of society within a democratic government?

AC: I don't see it as an imperative.

JS: You do not.

AC: I think we would have moved forward as much as we have with or without that report. As a matter of fact, that report had in the public image very little bearing. I think that some of the recommendations they made with respect to the judicial reform, some were very good, some not so good. But, in all, their proposals, I think, were going towards strengthening the independence and strengthening the judicial system as a whole. But with respect to investigating past crimes and telling people what had happened. I'm not sure that that is so necessary – or at least would have been necessary for our case because the population was very clear as to what had happened. Maybe I'm going too far saying that it would not be helpful in another case. It was probably like a best seller. It's in the news for a month and then a new best seller comes out and everybody starts reading the new best seller. Publicly speaking, that's what really happened to that report.

Nobody really even remembers it. Only the recommendations remained on the table during the implementation stage.

JS: When Boutros-Ghali – what he said, and this is relevant, obviously, to what's happening in South Africa and many other places. But he said that, "Now that the truth has been brought to light, the people of El Salvador can contemplate forgiveness." You don't think that was . . .

AC: What I am trying to say is that, with respect to the investigations, I am not sure that we didn't know what the Truth Committee came up with. Because we are a very small country everybody knows everybody here and everybody here is like my compadre, you know, everybody knows what goes on in El Salvador. It's very difficult to hide things here.

JS: The truth was known in other words.

AC: That aspect I'm not sure that it was really that helpful. Even before the Truth Committee came up with a report, I'm pretty sure that the Salvadorian society was ready to forgive. They might have not been ready to forget – but I think to forgive. If they were willing to forgive – it's everybody – not just this group or that group or whatever. Let's forgive everything and let's start a new era in the country.

JS: And that has happened? What about the ONUSAL work with the police – the transformation of the police?

AC: Not only ONUSAL, I must say that, in this respect, I think it has been the support of a lot of countries. Obviously, the UN was very helpful in getting countries to cooperate and the PNC has received a lot of support from a lot of countries.

JS: USAID, I think, for example, gave money.

AC: That's their only project. Spain, Chile, Mexico supported in the beginning – the Europeans, French, some Italians, some British. I think the best help that the UN made in that respect was to get all these countries to work together in a coordinated fashion towards setting up, on the one hand, the Academy, and the other hand the police itself. It's not been easy to start from scratch and build a new security force for a country. It was very complicated.

JS: This was one of those cases, in fact it was the first case, where the UN sent a whole police battalion, so to speak – civilian police to work with a country.

AC: Obviously, some countries decided to come down independently and others decided they would put on the UN's uniform and work with that uniform. But obviously, it is the different police forces of these countries that brought their know-how into how to help our national police. In a way, if we did not have the UN, we would not have all the

variety of support and – each police has it's good things and its bad things and here we were able to bring in a lot of experiences of what the good things were and try to put them together. A lot of manpower was necessary – for teachers – who we were going to use locally to teach courses in the new Police Academy?

JS: As you say, there were many countries and many institutions involved in this. I wanted to ask you specifically about the UN organizations that were active here, including the World Bank. How did you feel that they worked together or did they work together at all? How was the coordination – how was the total effect of all of the different UN organizations that were here?

AC: I really don't see the World Bank as involved in the peace process itself. We had been working since 1989 with the World Bank in a different area. I think, indirectly though, the World Bank, UNDP, the UN in general, were very helpful in gathering countries to help financially to have these agreements complied with. The amounts of money, especially at the beginning that the UN was able to get for the compliance of the agreements was obviously very important. We probably could not have made it without all that financial aid coming into the country – in the area of 800 million dollars.

JS: On the other hand, the UN itself, particularly in the person of Alvaro de Soto, was quite critical of the lack of coordination between what the World Bank was doing here and what the UNDP was doing particularly in agricultural policy. Did you see such a problem?

AC: I don't think the World Bank had to do anything. I never heard of the World Bank coming in and trying to do something with respect to agricultural policy in a country.

JS: There was conditionality, I think, in terms of the funds they provided.

AC: I don't think that in our five years that we ever made use of one cent of the standby loan of the World Bank. It was just simply a way of getting recognition that macro-economically speaking we were doing things the right way and we would therefore be seen as a good recipient of international loans from other sources. But we never used the World Bank's loan. I don't know if that has continued that way.

JS: No, the period I was talking about was, in fact, the earlier period. I think UNDP was helping to finance some of the land transfer program. I actually don't know, but de Soto wrote a whole article about it that appeared . . .

AC: As a matter of fact, just to be fair, also with the World Bank and IMF, we received a lot of, I would say, not recognition – but in a way understanding that in '92 the peace process was more important than macro-economic policy. Even though we had negotiated a certain target for an inflation rate and government spending and deficit, etceteras, we were going to need more spending to comply with the peace agreements, so we went up to both of them and said "Listen, you are going to have to accept that we are

not going to comply with our agreement and because this is more important for the government." We never were rejected by the IMF, nor the World Bank.

JS: You found understanding, then?

AC: Yes, and you see our inflation rate from '89 to '91 coming down – then you see the '92 going up – we never had a problem with either of the two institutions. Because they understood that there was something more important for that particular year that macro-economic policy. So, I'm not sure what de Soto meant.

JS: I'm glad to hear your comments on that. I am just going to ask one more question. This is a very specific question. I don't know whether you are familiar with it or not. El Salvador has achieved one thing that I think no other country has achieved that's had an internal war. You have more or less solved the problem of land mines. Again, UNICEF, I believe, helped with that, to a certain extent among the UN family. How did you do this, how did you go about the approach to land mines?

AC: We put out a bid for experts in de-mining zones in the country. When we finally chose one, the problem was getting the funds for it – which we didn't have at that time. We talked to the FMLN and the armed forces and said "If you guys help, we will go ahead with it and we will see how we pay for it later." We told UNICEF, "We are going to do this, but you will have to go around the world with your agencies trying to look for the moneys to pay for this." Both the FMLN and the armed forces – this was the first task

force working together after the peace agreements with this Belgian company. I think that, probably, doing it as early as possible made it possible for everybody to remember where they had mined. If you would allow time to pass, locations would be forgotten.

JS: Returning to the agreement you reached here in New York, the one in September. It was difficult for you to accept that in some ways, you were subject to a lot of criticism when you came back to San Salvador. The question is, "How were you able to keep your party together at that time?"

AC: I'm going to go beyond the specific question of September because everybody seems to think that I had a "lesion," had pain with the party. This is not so. I'm sure a lot of people won't believe now, but I'm glad that people like Bernie Aronson believe it now – Major d'Aubisson who everybody thought was a real hard-liner and the head of the party, was against the peace process and against the negotiations. It is totally incorrect. The guy was all for it. I know it is hard for some people to believe that that is true but that is exactly true and I never had any problem with the party. I'm sure that there are people who vote for ARENA, or if you ask them what party they belong to they would say ARENA, I have had a group of women who called me a traitor for negotiating. But the party itself, as an institution, as a whole, with d'Aubisson being for the peace process there was no way I had any problem with the party. He would take care of all the problems. I never really had much of a worry with trying to keep the party together. I always kept the party very involved and informed. One of the techniques that we used was – for instance, in the Judicial issue – I had people from the Supreme Court, from the

lawyer's associations, you know, "This is what's at stake here, why don't you give me recommendations." We had seven groups within the armed forces. Each group had one member from every rank, one being a sub-lieutenant, a lieutenant, a major, a lieutenant colonel, a colonel, discussing each of the issues that had to do with the armed forces chapter. "What are your recommendations?" I would try to get everybody to sort of "give me their ideas on this." And I would go back to them – you know, "Your idea was a good one, I will accept it," "This one wasn't we have to change it." I never felt that we had problems with people here. People imagined more of a problem than was really there.

JS: In that connection, did you have a sense that some people in your military had direct contact with some people in Washington on the military side or the CIA?

AC: In those days, every barrack here had quite a few US personnel.

JS: But you didn't have difficulty bringing in and maintaining unity, so to speak?

AC: Not within the party. Obviously, it was a lot more difficult with the armed forces, because the armed forces – although there is a leadership, that leadership is always questioned. Because it is hand picked by the President and not sort of elected by them. I am talking about the Minister, the Vice Minister, and two chiefs of staff. After every meeting between the FMLN and our negotiating team, I had a meeting with all the commanders. This is what happened – this is why – this is how this went. "What do you

think?" We got their feedback. I'm sure that some of them didn't agree with what we were doing but they – as all army officers should be where obedient to their higher-ranking officers.

JS: That's very interesting. Again, that is quite different from the impression that existed.

AC: Maybe we gave the wrong impression.

JS: Maybe it was helpful negotiating tactics.

AC: Well, that certainly was. The only instance I can think of that had to do with trying to influence us in accepting something within the Constitutional Reform Agreement. It had to do with Article 248 that deals with how the Constitution can be reformed. After I explained why I could not accept what the FMLN was proposing, there were no more calls. Everybody thinks that the U.S. sort of put the agenda forward - accept this, accept this, accept that. No, it was totally wrong. Very wrong impression. I'm not sure whether that was more of a local impression than outside. But locally, everybody thought that the U.S. was forcing the government to accept what they felt should be acceptable. But we never had any pressure from anybody in the U.S. government nor Congress.

JS: That's interesting, because in the UN again, the impression was rather the opposite, namely, that the U.S. government was under some pressure from your government to press the Secretary-General to take over.

AC: Not really take over. But, I think, we agreed with the U.S. government, that Alvaro de Soto was sometimes a problem and not a solution. In some instances, the direct presence of the Secretary-General could be helpful.

END OF SIDE TWO OF TAPE

Yale-UN Oral History
Alfredo Cristiani
James Sutterlin, Interviewer
July 25, 1997
in San Salvador, El Salvador

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